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## OPENING GENERAL SESSION Monday, July 25, 1994

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### "THE BIG ONE"--A REPORT ON THE COLD WAR OF 1994

It is 8:00 a.m. on January 16, 1994--Sunday morning. I am in Bowling Green spending the three-day weekend with my wife. Monday is a holiday--Martin Luther King's birthday. It has been a full weekend already. Friday afternoon I was a speaker at a lawyer forum in Louisville. That night I represented the Transportation Cabinet at the Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner in Bowling Green. It was cold when I left Louisville for the matinee production of *Phantom of the Opera*. The trip home to Bowling Green that night was even colder. I assured my wife that it wouldn't snow--too damn cold. But on Sunday morning, I am up studying the Weather Channel. My wife urges me to head back to Frankfort as soon as possible and give up on being home for Monday's holiday. So, about noon, I accept her intuition and head up I-65--little knowing this would be the last time I would get home for three weeks.

Coming up the road I hear various conversations on the two-way radio as districts begin preparation for snow. Weather forecasts were fluctuating but seemed to indicate sleet and rain would change to snow, and up to 4" accumulation was expected before diminishing to flurries on Monday afternoon.

By 5:00 p.m. District One, Paducah, reported traffic problems with a thick layer of ice and snow accumulating on top. At 5:30 p.m., the Central Office Division of Maintenance has opened their war room--it would not close for 173 hours. On Monday morning, snow is falling in amounts not seen for many years in Kentucky. I can't get my car out of the

parking lot at the apartment house where I live in Frankfort; Secretary Kelly can't get out of his driveway in Lexington. We converse quite frequently by telephone. During the 24 hours from noon Sunday until noon Monday, Kentucky experienced a weather situation which can best be described as the first of its kind since records have been kept for over 100 years. While surrounding states experienced ice or snow followed by record-low temperatures, the Commonwealth experienced all three simultaneously. Approximately four hours of rain and sleet were followed by a snowfall that rained from 5" in the South to more than 23" in North Central Kentucky.

At noon on Monday, Governor Jones declared a state of emergency and the interstates and parkways were closed to all traffic except for "vehicles providing necessary products such as home-heating fuels, perishable food products, medical supplies, and other essential items." By that time, many areas had experienced snow accumulations of 15" on top of a thick layer of ice. Not only was I-75 closed in Kentucky but also at Jelico Mountain in Tennessee.

Our Central Office staff was inundated with phone calls--more people were used than ever before. The phone number for our Division of Maintenance has been in magazines and on road maps across the country. The calls, which ran into thousands, were mostly from truckers and trucking company dispatch points across the nation. Information provided should have been a great benefit to the truckers and helped keep them off the highways. However, it did create a problem for the staff in keeping a detailed log and maintaining close contact with the districts. It also was detrimental to the overall coordination of snow removal operations with the districts. Our districts are the key, the backbone, of all snow removal operations. People here are the key to the entire program.

During this time, I answered more abusing phone calls than could be imagined. It was difficult to get people to understand that we were doing all we could do with the resources available. The Transportation Cabinet had 857 dump trucks with snowplows and salt spreaders, 162 graders and 146 front-end loaders. In addition, over 280 pieces of equipment were rented, borrowed, and several coal companies loaned graders with operators at no charge. The Kentucky National Guard used Humvees, dump trucks, jeeps, graders, and other equipment including a helicopter which took me on the coldest ride I have ever experienced, on Wednesday, the 19th. It is really an eerie experience to sit down in the JBL of I-75--no traffic--you only hear the silence and see the ice and snow.

That afternoon, about 6:00 p.m., I-64 east of Lexington was opened as were a few miles of I-24 and I-65 from Elizabethtown to the Tennessee State Line. By Friday afternoon all interstates and parkways were open. Our people had given of themselves to the limit and not one--not one--fatality had occurred on our highways during this time of emergency. We were exhausted and more than a little punchy.

I guess the thing I remember most vividly was a phone call I took on Friday morning while in Secretary Kelly's office. Obviously, the caller was on a cellular phone and obviously he was from north of the Big River. His message was that on I-75, in the north edge of Scott County, there was a problem in the southbound lane--there were stretches of clean pavement and then patches of ice. I acknowledged his comments and asked him where he was from. Michigan, he replied. I asked if he were going to Florida. He said yes. Well, I asked, if I meet you in Lexington, can I go with you?

Looking back, I think some of my most remembered comments came from David Dick, the sage of Plum Lick, a retired CBS news correspondent and a journalism professor at UK. He said it was bound to happen--a snowstorm like this. Most everybody in Plum Lick has been saying it for the past ten years, "We're going to have a real winter one of these times." There is TV in Plum Lick and sometimes we even turn it on, especially when there is a pretty good story like the winter of '94, which is what we guess they will name this one. You would have thought the snowbirds were about to lose it. Maybe if they stayed in Buffalo, where everybody "knows how to drive" or stay in Florida once they are down there, then those of us in Kentucky wouldn't have to be so concerned.

Take the fellow on television after they had brought him in from his car on I-75 around Dry Ridge, warmed him up, fed him and recommended that he stay there for his own safety as well as everybody else's. We thought he said, "I feel like I'm in jail and the Governor has put me here."

Well, Lord have mercy, if that had happened at Plum Lick, all the fellows sitting around the store would have said "Start walking, if you think you can drive, more power to you. We will be here when you get back, if you get back, which you probably won't."

As for the Governor, it was reassuring to see him on KET, which had the good sense to provide the message to the commercial stations, and to hear him asking people not to drive if they didn't absolutely have to. It sounded about right.

As for the complaint that Kentucky doesn't have once-every-ten-years snow- and ice-moving equipment, that doesn't make too much sense. When the folks up north get tired of driving through Kentucky, they can experiment with driving around it. We will still be here, the way they were up there at Dry Ridge in Grant County, giving everybody who needs it a warm place to sleep and three meals a day.

The winter of '94 gave us a chance to stay home, to watch the ice crystals on the window lit by the break of day, to bundle up in blankets and sleep, to receive with gratitude the help of neighbors and to accept the season for what it was intended to be: a better preparation for the coming spring when we hope the travellers will return and feel better about it.



Yes, it was a record-breaking winter--we used 166,471 tons of salt--a new world's record for the KYTC. We expended millions of dollars and my only comment is this--recently I read in the newspaper and saw on TV that I-75 was closed in Georgia due to water over the highway caused by torrential rains. I couldn't believe this--you can expect a flood like this every couple of hundred of years. I can't understand why Georgia DOT didn't have a lot of big pumps or something to get the water off the road. Evidently they are spending all their time and money planning for the '96 Olympics in Atlanta. Just wait until I see my counterpart in Georgia and ask him why they can't handle a little water!